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C O N F I D E N T I A L JERUSALEM 001285

SIPDIS

NEA FOR FRONT OFFICE AND IPA; NSC FOR SHAPIRO/KUMAR; JOINT STAFF FOR LTGEN SELVA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/28/2019

TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM KPAL KWBG IS

SUBJECT: ABU MAHER TO RETURN, CLAIM FATAH NUMBER TWO SPOT

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Greg Marchese
for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Summary. Fatah official Mohammed Rateb Ghneim (Abu Maher) is expected to arrive in the West Bank July 29, following decades in the Palestinian diaspora. Upon his return, which Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abu Mazen personally negotiated, Abu Maher will effectively become the number-two in the Fatah Party, and a potential successor. While his presence at the upcoming Fatah Sixth Party Congress is intended to strengthen Abu Mazen's hand, Abu Maher is generally expected to play a passive role in Fatah internal politics, and is unlikely to assume governmental office. End Summary.

Abu Maher to Return, Assume Number Two Spot in Fatah

¶2. (C) Fatah Central Committee (FCC) official and founding member Abu Maher told Fatah colleagues this weekend that he intended to travel to the West Bank prior to the opening of the Sixth Party Congress on August 4. In remarks to members of the overall preparatory committee tasked with planning the Congress (which he heads), Abu Maher said that Israeli authorities had approved his travel permit and residency status, and that he expected to arrive in Ramallah before July 30 and re-establish permanent residence in the West Bank.

¶3. (C) Fatah official Ahmed Abdul Rahman told Post that Abu Maher's presence at the Congress was intended to consolidate Abu Mazen's position within the FCC, especially in the event that Gaza-based delegates could not attend the conference. Other Fatah contacts said it was widely rumored that Abu Mazen -- who will escort Abu Maher from Amman to Ramallah -- facilitated Abu Maher's return in order to dislodge Abu Ala'a from his spot as Abbas's number two and putative successor.

Not Clear Whether Abu Maher Will Seek Government Office

¶4. (C) It is not clear what role, outside that of senior Fatah statesman, Abu Maher will play upon his return, those contacts said. Due to his lengthy absence, he is largely unknown to younger Fatah members and to the general public. His age (73) and status as a founding member of Fatah makes him a possible but unlikely successor to Abbas. Two of his sons hold positions in the PA government. The elder, Maher, was appointed Minister without Portfolio in 2009. But Abu Maher is not personally close to Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad, nor expected to seek an active role in PA politics, according to al-Ayyam editor and Abu Mazen confidante Akram

Haniya. Abu Maher is widely believed to have differed from Abbas on a number of policy issues since the two first met in Syria in the late 1960s or 1970s, not least over Oslo (para 4). However, Abu Mazen has made a concerted effort to improve the relationship in recent months, Haniya said.

Biography and Political Orientation

¶5. (C) As a young man Abu Maher flirted with the Muslim Brotherhood, according to press and other sources, before allying himself in 1958-59 with Fatah's founders. He worked as a recruiter and mobilizer during the 1960s and 70s in Jordan and Syria. In 1972, the Third Party Congress appointed him a member of the FCC. In 1982, the Fourth Party Congress confirmed his FCC membership. He continued to work as a Fatah organizer in Lebanon until his move to Tunis in the mid-1990s. Abu Maher is believed to have opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords; he refused at the time of their signing to return from exile and live in "occupied territory." However, he did not publicly reject the position of his party leadership.

WALLES